

# Animal & Wildlife Damage Prevention



Mike Linnell  
Federal Program Director

The Utah Wildlife Services (WS) program is a cooperative effort between the Utah Department of Agriculture and Food and the US Department of Agriculture. Protecting Utah's agriculture includes protecting livestock, with the majority of the program's effort directed at protecting sheep, lamb, and calves from predation.

Funding for the program comes from a number of sources, including Federal appropriations and State General fund. Livestock producers also contribute through a State tax nicknamed the "head tax" because it is assessed per head of livestock. Individual producers, livestock associations, and counties also make voluntary contributions to the program to pay for contract helicopter flying.

Coyotes remain the largest single predator species in Utah, both in population size and in the amount of livestock they kill. Calves are vulnerable to coyote predation for a short period just after birth, and the majority of the calf protection is concentrated in the spring as cattle calve. In the absence of predator management, calf losses could exceed 5% for the producers suffering losses, however, with predation management in place, losses are kept to less than 1%. Sheep and lambs remain vulnerable to predation throughout the year and the WS program works with sheep producers to provide protection on spring lambing range, summer range on the mountains, and on winter range in the deserts. In the absence of protective efforts, it is estimated that lamb losses could be as high as 30%, but the WS program in Utah keeps predation losses to less than 5% on a statewide basis.

Cougars and bears are also a significant predator of sheep, especially in the summer when sheep are grazed in the mountains. Of the predation on lambs reported to WS, 40% are by these two predators. Predation management for cougar and bear is implemented on a corrective basis, and does not begin until kills are discovered and confirmed. In order to limit losses caused by cougars or bears, the WS program must be prepared to respond quickly when killing occurs.

A significant amount of predation management is necessary to improve wildlife populations, and the WS program works with the Utah DWR to provide protection where wildlife populations are below objective. In 2007 the program worked in 20 deer units, 10 sage grouse areas, 4 bighorn sheep areas, and 4 pronghorn areas specifically to protect wildlife resources. WS also provides protection for endangered black-footed ferrets and Utah prairie dogs in transplant areas.

To assure that the WS program has no negative environmental consequences, Environmental Assessments (EA's) have been completed to assess the impacts of the program. While the program is very successful at protecting livestock and selected wildlife resources, there are no negative impacts to predator populations, wetlands and watersheds, or other parts of the environment. Annual monitoring of our program impacts is

conducted to assure that the analyses in the EA's are still complete and remain valid.

Personnel from the WS program have participated in wolf training as the State prepares for dispersing wolves from recovering populations in adjacent states. A significant amount of time and effort is necessary to assure that programs are in place to deal with wolves as they arrive. Per direction from the Utah Legislature, a wolf management plan is in place and the Agriculture and Wildlife Damage Prevention Board has adopted the role prescribed by the plan for the WS program. WS personnel will be primary responders when livestock are killed by wolves, as well as assisting in the capture, radio collaring, and monitoring of non-depredating wolves. WS personnel are widely recognized as the experts in dealing with predator-related problems, and our skills are needed to assure professional management of wolves as federally protected wildlife and through the transfer of authority to a State managed species.

The WS program plays a critical role in the early detection and management of wildlife-borne diseases. WS is conducting surveillance for early detection of highly pathogenic Asian Avian Influenza. The WS program has assisted the DWR in the removal and testing of mule deer where the potential transmission of Chronic Wasting Disease is a concern. WS has collected samples for plague, tularemia and West Nile Virus monitoring around the State, and responds to mortality events in wild birds to assist in detection of diseases. In 2007, WS established a full-time wildlife disease biologist position to coordinate rapid response and sampling efforts within WS and other agencies. Because our personnel are located throughout the state and are experts in back-country work, our help is often solicited in recovery of disease samples and even in human search and rescue missions.

The WS program also deals with other wildlife caused damage throughout the state. In Salt Lake County, WS operates an urban wildlife damage program which helps businesses, home owners, and public institutions with wildlife problems. Raccoons and skunks cause significant problems and WS provides technical assistance to prevent problems, as well as assisting in the removal of damaging individual animals. Urban waterfowl, such as mallard ducks and Canada geese cause damage to landscaping and are a human health and safety concern. WS also conducts disease monitoring in the urban program and responds to human safety cases involving cougars or bears.

The public, including farmers and ranchers, place a high intrinsic value on wildlife. In order to maintain healthy populations of wildlife and concurrently sustain productive agriculture, a professional wildlife damage management program must be in place to mitigate the damage while protecting wildlife populations. In Utah the cooperative Wildlife Services program fills that need.